

Funding the “Final War”

LTTE Intimidation and Extortion in the Tamil Diaspora

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I. Summary and Recommendations

Ninety percent of people, even if they don't support the LTTE, they are scared. The killing doesn't just happen back home in Sri Lanka. It happens in Paris, in Canada. They burned the library,¹ they broke the legs of DBS Jeyaraj. They tried to stop the CTBC radio from organizing. A journalist was killed in Paris. The threat is not only in Sri Lanka. It's everywhere, all over the world.

—Tamil community activist, Toronto, January 2006

Between 1983 and 2002, the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) cost an estimated 60,000 or more lives, and was marked by gross human rights abuses and violations of the laws of war on both sides. The war prompted nearly one-quarter of Sri Lanka's Tamils to leave the country, many fleeing government abuses, creating a Tamil diaspora that now numbers approximately 600,000-800,000 worldwide.

As Sri Lankan Tamils established themselves in Canada, the United Kingdom (U.K.) and other Western countries, the Tamil community became a significant source of financial and political support for the LTTE in its struggle to establish an independent state, "Tamil Eelam," for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka's North and East. While many members of the Tamil diaspora willingly and actively support the LTTE, others have been subject to intimidation, extortion, and physical violence as the LTTE seeks to suppress criticism of its human rights abuses and to ensure a steady flow of income.

Journalists and activists in the Tamil diaspora who openly criticize the LTTE or are perceived to be anti-LTTE have been subject to severe beatings, death threats, smear campaigns, and fabricated criminal charges. In 2005, the LTTE detained two British Tamils for several weeks in Sri Lanka in order to gain control over a Hindu temple in London. Such incidents have created a culture of fear within the Tamil community, stifling dissent and discouraging individuals from organizing activities that are not sanctioned by the LTTE.

The LTTE has for many years pressured members of the Tamil community to provide financial support for its operations. In late 2005 and early 2006, as armed violence escalated in Sri Lanka's North and East, threatening the four-year-old ceasefire between

¹ The Tamil Resource Center, burned by arson in Toronto in May 1994.

the government and the LTTE, the LTTE launched a massive fundraising drive in Canada and parts of Europe, pressuring individuals and business owners in the Tamil diaspora to give money for the “final war.” Fundraisers for the LTTE and LTTE-linked organizations went from house to house, and approached businesses and professionals, demanding significant sums of money for their cause. In Canada, families were typically pressed for between Cdn\$2,500² and Cdn\$5,000, while some businesses were asked for up to Cdn\$100,000. Members of the Tamil community in the U.K., France, Norway, and other European countries were asked for similar amounts.

Individuals who refused were sometimes threatened. Some were told that if they didn’t pay the requested sum, they would not be able to return to Sri Lanka to visit family members. Others were warned they would be “dealt with” or “taught a lesson.” After refusing to pay over Cdn\$20,000, one Toronto business owner said LTTE representatives made threats against his wife and children.

The LTTE and groups linked to it such as the World Tamil Movement repeatedly call and visit Tamil families seeking funds. Some families have received as many as three visits in a single week. Fundraisers may refuse to leave the house without a pledge of money, and have told individuals who claim not to have funds available to borrow the money, to place contributions on their credit cards, or even to re-mortgage their homes.

The LTTE identifies Tamils from the West who return to Sri Lanka to visit family members, and systematically pressures them for funds when they arrive in LTTE-controlled territory in the North of Sri Lanka. The assessed “rate” is often Cdn\$1, £1, or €1 per day for the length of time they have lived in the West, so individuals who have been abroad for years may be asked for thousands, and told they may not leave until they produce the requested amount. In some cases, the LTTE may confiscate their passports until the money is paid.

Many members of the Tamil diaspora vividly remember government abuses during the war, and willingly contribute funds to the LTTE. They see the Tamil Tigers as a legitimate and important representative of the Tamil people and their interests. They support the LTTE’s goal of establishing an independent Tamil state and the use of military means to achieve that objective.

² At time of writing, the Canadian dollar was worth US\$0.87 or £0.50.

Other members of the Tamil community do not wish to contribute, either because of their personal economic circumstances, or because they do not believe in the LTTE's goals or methods. Some support Tamil political parties that have been decimated or marginalized by the LTTE. However, under intense pressure or outright threats, these individuals may be forced to provide financial support for LTTE operations, including its continuing pattern of child recruitment, political killings, and other human rights abuses that have continued, even during the four-year ceasefire.

The LTTE's dependence on the Tamil diaspora for financial support, and the diaspora's substantial size and influence, give the diaspora unique potential to influence the LTTE's policies and behavior, including its human rights practices. However, that potential has been effectively neutralized by the LTTE's effective use of intimidation and extortion within the community.

The governments of countries that host substantial Tamil populations have a responsibility to protect individuals from these abuses. However, government authorities admit that responding to such activity has not been a high priority, and they have taken little action to respond. Although fear within the Tamil community has resulted in few individual complaints to the police or other law enforcement, clear patterns of intimidation and extortion should prompt proactive government action, including police investigations, prosecutions, and public outreach to the community to publicize individuals' rights and avenues of complaint.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch conducted research for this report from October 2005 through February 2006, conducting interviews in person and by telephone with members of the Tamil communities in Toronto, Canada; London, U.K.; Geneva, Switzerland; and Dusseldorf, Germany. The focus of the investigation was on the Tamil communities in Canada and the U.K., as together these two countries host nearly half of the global Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. In both countries, Human Rights Watch interviewed Tamil business owners, professionals, activists, journalists, and other individuals. Most interviews were conducted in English; some were conducted with Tamil translation.

We also talked with representatives of the London Metropolitan Police, the Toronto Police, the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the World Tamil Movement, and independent experts. In February 2006 we submitted questions in writing to the LTTE in Sri Lanka regarding the issues covered in this report, but did not receive a response. In February 2006 we also contacted the British Tamil Association by both telephone and electronic mail with questions related to this report, but did not receive a reply.

Because of the significant security risks for Tamils interviewed for this report, the names of most individuals are kept confidential. Some locations and other identifying details are also withheld or changed in order to protect the identity of those who spoke with Human Rights Watch. Some cases reported to Human Rights Watch have been omitted entirely, because it was not possible to describe the reported incidents without putting the individuals involved at risk.

Recommendations

To the governments of Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries with a significant Tamil diaspora

Take active steps to protect Tamil residents from harassment, threats, extortion and violence linked to the LTTE. Specifically:

- Establish a special interagency task force, headed by the police and including other agencies as appropriate, to actively investigate intimidation and extortion in the Tamil community, and initiate prosecutions as warranted;
- Initiate a public education campaign in the Tamil community, using Tamil newspapers, radio, and other media, to publicize relevant law related to intimidation, harassment, and fundraising by the LTTE or other groups, and steps that individuals can take if they are subject to such activity;
- Establish a special hotline, staffed by Tamil speakers, to receive complaints of intimidation and extortion, and provide information as appropriate to law enforcement authorities;
- Initiate meetings with leaders in the Tamil community to discuss patterns of LTTE-related intimidation and extortion, using such meetings to communicate the government's deep concern regarding such activity, its commitment to respond, and steps that are being taken to protect members of the Tamil community;

- Take steps to inform members of the Tamil community that funds raised for the LTTE may indirectly support the commission of war crimes, including the recruitment of children as soldiers;
- Urge the LTTE to end all use of violence, threats, intimidation, and harassment against members of the Tamil diaspora.

To the LTTE and organizations linked to the LTTE

- Immediately stop all use of violence, threats, intimidation and harassment to solicit funds from the Tamil community, including among the diaspora and from members of diaspora communities making return visits to Sri Lanka;
- Immediately stop all use of violence, threats, intimidation or harassment against Tamils who express criticism of the LTTE or organize events or activities independently of the LTTE.

To the Tamil diaspora

- When it is possible without undue personal risk, ensure that funds provided to organizations in Sri Lanka are not directly or indirectly benefiting the LTTE so long as the LTTE continues to commit serious human rights abuses.
- Seek opportunities to promote human rights within the Tamil community, including dialogue regarding the community's role in improving the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.